



America's 51st State?

Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico are pushing for statehood. But will Congress ever go along? **BY GABRIEL CHARLES TYLER**

It's been nearly six decades since Alaska and Hawaii joined the Union as the 49th and 50th states in 1959. Is it time for the U.S. to add another star or two to the flag?

That's the question both Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico are asking Americans to consider in separate

pushes for statehood that have gained some momentum recently.

For residents of the District of Columbia, it's a question of fairness. Americans in D.C. serve in the U.S. military, sit on juries, and pay federal taxes just like everyone else. But because of the capital's special status as a federal district,

its residents don't have voting representation in Congress, so they have no say in the nation's laws. They also have limited control over their own affairs because any law passed by D.C.'s local government requires congressional approval.

That bothers Cheryl Liu, 19, who moved to D.C. from Hinsdale, Illinois, last year to attend Georgetown University. She's now an active member of the group Students for D.C. Statehood.

"I thought it was a little bit ridiculous that citizens living here don't have a voice in Congress, or control over their own affairs," Liu says.

The Founding Fathers

D.C.'s second-class status goes back to America's earliest days. The Founding Fathers thought it was important to keep the nation's capital in a special federal district, and included a provision about it in the Constitution. They worried that if the capital were geographically within a state, that state might have undue influence over the federal government. When D.C. was established as the nation's capital in 1790, only about 3,000 people lived in the 100-square-mile area that was carved out from Maryland and Virginia.*

But as Washington's population grew over time (it now has about 675,000 residents—more than Wyoming or Vermont), residents began demanding more of a voice in their government. In 1961, the 23rd Amendment to the Constitution gave D.C. residents the right to vote for president for the first time. In 1970, D.C. received a nonvoting "delegate" in the House of Representatives. And in 1973, Congress allowed the District to form a local government with a council, a mayor, and other local agencies. But Congress still controls Washington's budget and has to approve all its local laws.

The lack of congressional representation is a focus of the current push for statehood, which would give D.C. full voting rights in Congress, with two senators and one representative in the House. Though some people argue that statehood for D.C. would require a constitutional amendment, most advocates say their

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*Today, the area is about 61 square miles because some of the land was returned to Virginia.

everything. And as she grew older, she juggled school with all her chores at home: making fresh bread every night for her family of seven, hanging laundry to dry, helping her brothers and sisters with their homework. Still, she was single-mindedly focused on doing well in her own studies. School was her refuge. It was also her exit ticket out of the ironing stand.

Varsha's father was pleased to see what a devoted student she was. The last thing he wanted for her was to follow in his footsteps. "I have been pressing clothes all my life," he said once. "The main thing I want for my children is that they do something better."

But the more educated she became, the more assertive she became. She wanted to learn how to dance. He said no. She wanted to go on field trips. He said no.

"She is growing wings," he once complained to the school principal, by which he meant that she was becoming too independent. "She's talking back."

Still Plotting, Still Pushing

The idea of becoming a police officer first came when she went with her father to hear a talk by Gurgaon's assistant commissioner of police—a woman who spoke of growing up in a poor family, in a mud hut. She said she had studied hard, aced the police exam, and risen up the ranks of the Gurgaon police department.

Varsha was moved. If she can do it, Varsha thought to herself, why can't I?

Anyway, it suited her personality. "I'm like a boy at school," she said. Unlike other

girls, she never once asked boys to help her, say, lift a heavy chair in the classroom. "I'm independent. I can do my work. My nickname at school is 'Proactive.'"

But when Varsha said she wanted to take the police service exam, her father shot it down immediately. No way, he said. How would he find a husband for her? No respectable family would allow a daughter-in-law to roam around arresting bad guys any time of day and night.

Varsha found it hard to let go of the idea, especially after a woman, just a few years older, was gang-raped as she returned home from a movie one night in December 2012. The woman died of her injuries, but only after telling her story to the police—and in turn, sparking protests by young people across the country.

Varsha was 16 at the time. It strengthened her resolve to try and be a cop. And anyway, since the attack, police departments were looking to hire more women. This too was an argument she made to her father.

His answer was still no.

It's not that her father didn't love her. He loved her fiercely. He wanted her to have a good life. But if she saw in the attack a call for her to serve her country, he saw in it a chilling confirmation of all that he feared. The attack seemed to make him all the more protective, to rein in his daughter even more.

In May 2013, Varsha aced her 10th grade exams, which in India is sort of like the end of American high school. Many

kids stop going to school after 10th grade. But not Varsha. She earned the second-highest score in her class, forcing her father to let her continue her education.

In 11th grade, Varsha reluctantly signed up to take business classes because her father had it in his head that she could get a job at a bank, which he regarded as a suitable place for a young woman to work. A teacher said there were jobs in accounting, so Varsha signed up for an accounting class too. It was a breeze—and boring. She saw every hour spent on accounting homework as time away from her real goal: preparing for the police exam.

"Now I've changed my dreams. In my heart it's still there: Can I become a police officer?" she told me then. "But when I see my family situation, my confidence gets down."

Bright, headstrong Varsha. Her ambitions were repeatedly doused. And yet, she kept cutting new paths for herself.

In May 2015, she nailed her 12th-grade exams, scoring so high that her father had to let her go to university.

She turns 20 this September. For now, she's staved off marriage talk. She rides the metro every day to attend classes at Delhi University. She's not sure she can ever persuade her father to let her be a cop, but she is still pushing him every step of the way. ●

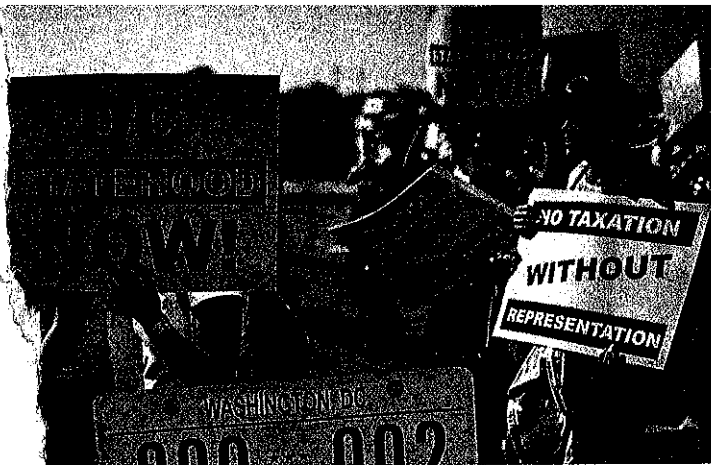
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Varsha's generation is burning with red-hot ambition.

ADITYA KAPOOR/BETTY IMAGES ASSIGNMENT FOR NEW YORK TIMES



At the ironing stand:
Varsha (in orange pants)
with her family



Pro-statehood slogan on a D.C. license plate (*left*); D.C. statehood advocates at the Lincoln Memorial (*above, left*); a Puerto Rican statehood proponent at the Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York (*above, right*)

plan is consistent with the Constitution. They want to retain a federal district consisting of places like the U.S. Capitol, the National Mall, and the White House, and to create a new state out of the residential areas. Since 2000, the slogan “Taxation Without Representation”—an allusion to the American Colonies’ grievances against the British in the late 1700s—has been stamped on D.C. license plates as a rallying cry for the statehood movement.

“This really gets to the heart of the American Revolution: that we should end taxation without representation,” says D.C. Councilmember Charles Allen.

Washington residents may soon have a chance to weigh in on statehood in a citywide referendum in November. Although Congress has final say over the admission of any new states, hopeful D.C. leaders already have settled on a name—New Columbia—and drafted a constitution for a 51st state.

Washingtonians aren’t the only ones agitating for statehood. Residents of

Puerto Rico, a self-governing U.S. commonwealth since the Spanish-American War in 1898, are U.S. citizens. But the 3.7 million people living on the island, about 1,000 miles southeast of Miami, don’t have full constitutional rights. They can’t vote in presidential elections (except primaries), and they have only one, nonvoting, congressional delegate.

Puerto Rico’s ‘Yes’ Vote

Like D.C., Puerto Rico has had a statehood movement for nearly five decades. Four referendums have been held since 1967, and in 2012, for the first time, a majority of voters in Puerto Rico favored statehood in a nonbinding vote. Another referendum—the first funded by the U.S. government—is expected soon. If Puerto Rico votes yes again, it could bring its petition for statehood to the U.S. House and Senate, which would have final say.

Critics worry that statehood could be a burden because it would require residents of the island to pay U.S. federal taxes at

a time when Puerto Rico’s economy is in deep crisis. But others think becoming a state could help it get more U.S. aid.

“For Puerto Rico to prosper, it should be treated equally. And to be treated equally, it must become a state,” says Pedro Pierluisi, Puerto Rico’s delegate in Congress.

But many experts say congressional approval is a long shot for D.C. and Puerto Rico, mainly for political reasons. Both houses of Congress are controlled by Republicans, who fear that residents of D.C. and Puerto Rico would send Democrats to Washington.

“Politically, that just won’t happen because it’ll change the political balance in the country,” says Roger Pilon, founder and director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Constitutional Studies.

Some opponents of D.C. statehood say residents of the nation’s capital should be absorbed into Maryland or Virginia. But D.C. officials largely oppose this idea.

“I don’t consider myself to be a Marylander or a Virginian,” says D.C. Councilmember Allen. “I consider myself to be a Washingtonian.”

Liu, the Georgetown University student, remains hopeful that Congress will see beyond the politics.

“This issue is about much more than residents in D.C. and Puerto Rico,” Liu says. “It’s about all Americans, because when you boil it down, it’s about civil rights and equality.” •

NICE TRY Some statehood efforts that failed

Transylvania

In the 1770s, frontiersman Daniel Boone proposed a 14th colony in part of what is now Kentucky, but the Continental Congress said no. (*sylvania* means “pleasant, woody area.”)

Texlahoma

In the early 1900s, parts of northern Texas and western Oklahoma sought a new state (the name combined Texas and Oklahoma), hoping it would lead to the construction of better roads.

Absaroka

During the Great Depression, frustrated ranchers and farmers proposed a new state (named for a mountain range along the Montana-Wyoming border) to get more New Deal aid.

Jefferson

In 1941, parts of California and Oregon wanted to break off into a new state named for Thomas Jefferson.

Superior

In the 19th century and again in the early 1960s, residents of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula lobbied for a new state, named for Lake Superior.

